**Radical Prairie Printworks: Girard, Kansas, Haldeman-Julius, and the Local Conditions of Free Speech**

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This paper examines how a small town in southeast Kansas became one of the most important nodes in the radical print culture of the early twentieth century. Emanuel Haldeman-Julius is often remembered as the publisher of the Little Blue Books, a vast series of cheap pocket-sized texts that carried freethought, socialist, sex-education, and classic literature into millions of homes. Less often explored is the specific environment that made it possible for him to do so from Girard, Kansas. Contrary to the notion that "additional free speech laws" in Kansas uniquely enabled his work, the decisive legal forces acting on Haldeman-Julius were federal: postal regulations, Comstock obscenity definitions, and wartime speech restrictions. What Girard and the "Little Balkans" region did provide was a dense radical milieu—unionized coal miners, immigrant communities, socialist newspapers, and projects such as the People's College—that normalized dissenting print and created a tolerant local ecosystem for controversial ideas. By tracing the interplay between this radical local culture, the ordinary but important Kansas constitutional protections, and the extraordinary federal regulatory regime, the paper clarifies what actually sheltered and constrained Haldeman-Julius. It concludes by drawing lessons for contemporary debates about free speech, locality, and the infrastructure of dissent.

Keywords: Haldeman-Julius, Little Blue Books, Girard Kansas, Little Balkans, coal mining region, Appeal to Reason, People's College, Marian Wharton, radical press, socialist press, freethought, postal censorship, Comstock laws, Kansas Constitution, free speech.

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## 1. Introduction: Free Speech on the Radical Prairie

The image of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius printing millions of Little Blue Books from a small Kansas town invites a tempting simplification. On this story, Girard sits in a kind of legal oasis: Kansas supposedly had "extra" or unusually strong free speech protections, and a bold publisher simply took advantage of them. The state appears as a haven, the town as a quirky outpost, and the rest is attributed to individual courage.

This paper starts from a more demanding question: not "Was Haldeman-Julius brave?" but "What, exactly, made it possible for him to do what he did, from where he did it, under the laws that actually applied?" When we ask that version, the easy answer about "additional free speech laws in Kansas" begins to crumble. The decisive pressures on Haldeman-Julius's enterprise came from federal power: postal regulations, national obscenity standards, and wartime limits on dissent. Kansas's own constitutional language on speech and press sounded strong, but in practice it was interpreted in ways broadly aligned with federal doctrine rather than dramatically exceeding it.

Yet Girard clearly was not just an arbitrary pin on the map. The "Little Balkans" region of southeast Kansas—mining country, union country, and for a time one of the most important nodes in American socialism—furnished a dense cultural and institutional setting in which radical print made sense. The town's presses, postal connections, and local tolerance were not accidents. They were the product of decades of conflict, organizing, and experiment. The central claim of this paper is that Haldeman-Julius's freedom to publish from Girard rested less on special, additional legal protections and more on the interplay between a relatively ordinary legal framework and an extraordinarily radical local culture.

By reconstructing that interplay, the paper seeks to clarify how free speech actually works in practice: not as an abstraction floating above geography, but as a concrete outcome of law, infrastructure, and social norms in a particular place and time.

### 1.1 Framing the question: did "extra" free speech laws matter?

The motivating question can be stated quite simply: did Kansas have "extra" or uniquely generous free speech laws that made it easier for Emanuel Haldeman-Julius to write and publish from Girard? Behind that phrase lie several distinct possibilities. One is constitutional: perhaps the Kansas Bill of Rights offered a degree of protection for speech and press that went significantly beyond the federal First Amendment. Another is statutory: maybe Kansas passed specific laws aimed at shielding publishers or limiting obscenity prosecutions more than other states did. A third is practical: even if the texts of law were similar to those elsewhere, perhaps Kansas officials enforced them in a consistently more permissive way.

The argument developed here is that none of these possibilities, taken alone, adequately explain the Girard phenomenon. Kansas did have strong-sounding constitutional language on speech and press, but its courts did not interpret that language as granting a radically broader license than the federal baseline. Far from being uniquely laissez-faire, Kansas state authorities would later be involved in high-profile obscenity enforcement against paperback books. Nor could state-level protections have meaningfully insulated a publisher from the reach of federal postal law, federal criminal statutes, or national wartime restrictions on dissent.

Instead, the question must be reframed. Rather than searching for a narrowly legal "extra" protection that Girard possessed and other places lacked, the more fruitful inquiry asks how legal frameworks, local culture, and material infrastructure combined to create a zone where certain kinds of speech could flourish. In that sense, the paper is not a hunt for an overlooked clause in Kansas law. It is an investigation into how a standard set of formal protections, applied through the lens of a particular community and its institutions, could yield a quite distinctive outcome.

By rephrasing the puzzle this way, the introduction sets the stage for a broader claim: that the story of Haldeman-Julius and Girard is less about exceptional legal text and more about the alignment of a radical regional milieu with a national legal order that was, at key points, ambivalent and constrained but still negotiable.

### 1.2 Haldeman-Julius, Girard, and the Little Blue Books

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius did not create Girard's radical print culture from scratch. He arrived in a town that had already become famous as the home of *Appeal to Reason*, the socialist weekly founded by Julius Wayland. From this unlikely base on the Kansas prairie, *Appeal* had grown into one of the leading organs of American socialism, boasting hundreds of thousands of subscribers and serving as a rallying point for populists, radicals, and labor organizers across the country. Girard's presses, typesetters, and mailing rooms were designed for mass circulation long before the first Little Blue Book was printed.

When Haldeman-Julius acquired the *Appeal* operation during the post–World War I decline of the paper, he inherited not only physical machinery but a mailing list, a brand, and a set of expectations. Readers already associated Girard with radical ideas, plainspoken criticism of capitalism and organized religion, and practical education for working people. Local workers were accustomed to seeing bundles of socialist newspapers leaving town by the trainload. The town itself had learned to live with, or at least tolerate, its notoriety as a socialist hub.

The Little Blue Books project took this inheritance in a new direction. Instead of a weekly newspaper, Haldeman-Julius began issuing compact, inexpensive booklets on an enormous range of topics: world literature, philosophy, freethought, sex education, practical self-

improvement, and more. The underlying format was radical in its own way. By compressing texts into pocket-sized pamphlets and pricing them at just a few cents, he aimed to make reading material accessible to people who had previously been excluded by cost, distance, or intimidation.

Girard's significance in this story is twofold. First, as a production site, the town already possessed the necessary industrial and postal infrastructure to handle mass printing and nationwide distribution. Second, as a community, it had been shaped by decades of exposure to socialist and freethought discourse, creating a local environment in which workers, officials, and neighbors were more likely than average to accept the presence of a large radical press.

The introduction thus situates Haldeman-Julius not as a lone genius in legal isolation, but as a publisher operating at the intersection of an inherited radical apparatus and a changing national regulatory landscape. The question is not simply why he chose Girard, but why Girard, at that particular historical moment, was capable of sustaining his experiment.

**1.3 Method and sources: law, local history, and print culture**

To answer these questions, the paper draws on three overlapping bodies of material: legal sources, regional and local history, and scholarship on radical print culture. None of these, by themselves, can fully explain the Girard phenomenon. Taken together, they allow a more complete picture of how law and locality mutually shaped what could be said and printed.

On the legal side, the analysis considers the relevant provisions of the Kansas Constitution, state statutes on press and obscenity, and the interpretive stance of Kansas courts toward their own free speech clause. It sets these alongside the federal First Amendment as understood in the early– to mid–twentieth century, the major federal statutes governing the mails and wartime dissent, and key cases that defined the boundaries of obscenity and seditious speech. This framework clarifies what formal protections and threats existed on paper and how they were likely to be understood by a publisher in Haldeman-Julius's position.

Regional and local history provides the second pillar. Studies of the "Little Balkans" coal-mining region, accounts of labor struggles and unionization in southeast Kansas, and histories of Girard itself situate the town within a wider landscape of class conflict, immigration, and political radicalism. These sources help explain how an otherwise small and remote community became a node in national debates about socialism and free thought, and how local officials and residents negotiated the practical realities of hosting a controversial press.

The third body of material comes from the history of radical print and education: histories of *Appeal to Reason*, of the People's College and its correspondence courses, and of the Little Blue Books as artifacts and business enterprise. This literature illuminates the networks of editors, teachers, and readers that stretched out from Girard, the editorial strategies used to navigate

the edges of legality and propriety, and the practical mechanics of reaching a mass audience with cheap printed matter.

Methodologically, the paper takes an institutional rather than strictly biographical approach. While Haldeman-Julius's personality and convictions certainly matter, the focus falls on structures: constitutions and courts, unions and coal camps, presses and postal routes. The aim is to show how a combination of legal rules, social norms, and physical infrastructure converged in a particular midwestern town to permit a wide range of controversial texts to circulate—not because Kansas uniquely "added" free speech to the law, but because the ordinary law of speech met an extraordinary radical prairie.

## 2. The Legal Frame: Kansas Guarantees and Federal Constraints

Even if Girard and Crawford County felt like a radical island, Haldeman-Julius's ability to ship millions of Little Blue Books depended on two very different legal layers. On paper, Kansas gave printers an unusually strong constitutional guarantee: "the liberty of the press shall be inviolate," followed by a sweeping promise that "all persons may freely speak, write or publish their sentiments on all subjects." But his mail-order empire lived inside a federal system in which Congress controlled the post office, federal courts defined the limits of political agitation and obscenity, and wartime statutes such as the Espionage Act sharply narrowed protection for radical speech. Kansas could promise to leave him alone; it could not promise that Washington would.

This section reconstructs that double frame. First, it looks at Section 11 of the Kansas Bill of Rights and how Kansas courts understood its promise of an "inviolate" press. Second, it sketches the federal First Amendment doctrine that actually governed the riskiest parts of Haldeman-Julius's activity, from the World War I era through the early Cold War. Third, it turns to the specific machinery of postal regulation, Comstock-era obscenity law, and the Espionage Act—precisely the tools used against some of his socialist contemporaries. Finally, it draws the basic structural conclusion: generous state-level language could shape local police and prosecutors but could not neutralize federal power over the mail or national security.

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### 2.1 The Kansas Bill of Rights and the "inviolate" press

Section 11 of the Kansas Bill of Rights gives a printer in Girard language that, at first glance, looks more expansive than the terse federal First Amendment. Where the First Amendment merely forbids Congress from "abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press," Section 11 declares that "the liberty of the press shall be inviolate; and all persons may freely speak, write

or publish their sentiments on all subjects, being responsible for the abuse of such rights." It goes on to provide a special protection in libel suits: the truth may be given in evidence, and if the publication was "for justifiable ends," the accused must be acquitted. In the mid-19th-century context in which Kansas adopted its constitution, that language aligned the state with a broad, republican understanding of the press as a political safeguard rather than a mere private business.

For a figure like Haldeman-Julius, this text did two things. Symbolically, it gave him a ready-made constitutional story: that a Kansas publisher who printed cheap booklets on religion, sex, and socialism was exercising a right the state itself called "inviolate." Practically, it gave him some assurance that state officials—county prosecutors, sheriffs, state courts—could not easily suppress his work simply because it was unpopular or irreligious. If a local moral crusader wanted to charge his shop with libel for attacking preachers or politicians, Section 11's truth-plus-justification clause was a significant hurdle.

Over time, however, Kansas courts interpreted that broad language in a way that largely tracked federal doctrine. In the 20th century, the Kansas Supreme Court and later the attorney general's office repeatedly described Section 11 as "generally considered coextensive" with the First Amendment's speech and press protections. Courts acknowledged that Section 11's wording was rhetorically stronger—"inviolate" sounds more absolute than "shall make no law"—but in practice they treated both provisions as recognizing robust but limited freedoms, subject to sanctions for "abuse" in cases such as defamation, incitement, or obscenity.

For Haldeman-Julius's period, that coextensive reading matters for two reasons. First, it suggests that Kansas judges were unlikely to create a uniquely protective state-law safe harbor for his publications; they would tend to look to federal standards when evaluating claims about sedition or obscenity. Second, it means that whatever effective freedom he enjoyed in Girard came more from prosecutorial and jury culture than from a radically different legal doctrine. A sympathetic county attorney could look at Section 11 and decide that Little Blue Books fell on the "not an abuse" side of the line—but that was a matter of attitude as much as of text.

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### 2.2 Federal First Amendment doctrine in Haldeman-Julius's lifetime

Against this state backdrop, the federal law that actually controlled the post office and wartime dissent in Haldeman-Julius's lifetime was both more distant and, in crucial moments, more hostile to radical speech. From the 1910s through the early 1950s, the Supreme Court moved slowly from a highly deferential stance toward Congress's regulation of speech to a more protective one, but most of the landmark protections arrived late in or after Haldeman-Julius's career.

The key turning point for wartime speech was Schenck v. United States (1919), in which the Court unanimously upheld the conviction of a socialist who mailed anti-draft leaflets and introduced the "clear and present danger" test. Speech that posed a sufficiently proximate and serious threat to the war effort, the Court held, was not protected by the First Amendment. Subsequent cases in the same era treated criticism of the draft, anti-war agitation, and socialist advocacy as punishable if they were deemed likely to obstruct recruitment or encourage resistance. From the perspective of a socialist publisher in Girard in the 1910s, the federal courts were not a friendly forum.

A second key development was incorporation—the process by which the Supreme Court began to apply the First Amendment to state and local governments through the Fourteenth Amendment. Gitlow v. New York (1925) is usually cited as the first decision to assume that the free speech and free press guarantees were "fundamental" liberties binding on the states. But Gitlow itself upheld a conviction under New York's criminal anarchy law for the publication of a revolutionary socialist manifesto. Incorporation therefore extended federal constraints downward without yet guaranteeing strong protection for radicals upward.

The most important press case of Haldeman-Julius's mature career was Near v. Minnesota (1931), which struck down a state "gag law" allowing courts to shut down "malicious, scandalous and defamatory" newspapers. The Supreme Court held that prior restraints—orders forbidding publication in advance—were presumptively unconstitutional, and emphasized that the Fourteenth Amendment made the First Amendment's press freedom applicable to the states. Near is rightly regarded as "one of the pillars of American press freedom," but its main effect was to curb state efforts to suppress newspapers outright, not to limit federal control of the mails or federal sedition and obscenity prosecutions.

For most of Haldeman-Julius's publishing life, then, federal doctrine looked like this: Congress enjoyed broad latitude to criminalize speech that interfered with war efforts or national security; the postal system could deny or revoke mailing privileges to publications deemed seditious or obscene; and only slowly did the Court begin to articulate robust protections against prior restraints and content-based punishment. Kansas's "inviolate" press clause operated within that federal envelope, not outside it.

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### 2.3 Postal regulations, Comstock obscenity standards, and the Espionage Act

If one focuses on the specific chokepoint that mattered most for a mail-order operation in Girard—the United States Post Office—the relevant law was even less forgiving than the general First Amendment case law suggests.

First, there was the Comstock Act of 1873, a federal statute that made it a crime to send through the mails any “obscene” materials, including not only explicit sexual content but also contraceptives and information about birth control. Anthony Comstock and, later, other postal officials interpreted this mandate broadly, targeting not only pornography but also sex-education materials, radical literature, and works that challenged conventional morality. The Act gave the Post Office sweeping power to declare items “non-mailable” and either seize them or deny them access to subsidized classes of mail.

Second, during World War I, Congress layered the Espionage Act of 1917 and then the Sedition Act of 1918 on top of Comstock. These laws criminalized conveying information intended to interfere with the draft or the war effort, and explicitly authorized the Post Office to deny mailing privileges to publications deemed disloyal or obstructive. Postmaster General Albert Burleson used this authority aggressively, revoking second-class mailing permits for socialist and anarchist newspapers and blocking the circulation of anti-war materials. Courts were, on the whole, deferential: in United States ex rel. Milwaukee Social Democratic Publishing Co. v. Burleson (1921), the Supreme Court upheld the revocation of a socialist paper’s mailing privileges where its content allegedly violated the Espionage Act.

Third, obscenity doctrine remained vague and flexible throughout Haldeman-Julius’s career. The federal Comstock standard was echoed in many state laws, and officials often treated any frank treatment of sex, birth control, or non-marital relationships as potentially obscene. It was not until Roth v. United States in 1957—after Haldeman-Julius’s death—that the Supreme Court articulated a modern test for obscenity focused on whether the material appealed to prurient interests, was patently offensive, and lacked redeeming social value. Even then, enforcement remained unpredictable. The later case A Quantity of Books v. Kansas (1964) illustrates how Kansas could itself be the site of heavy-handed obscenity enforcement: the Supreme Court struck down a Kansas procedure that allowed mass seizure of allegedly obscene books without adequate safeguards against suppressing non-obscene works.

For a publisher in Girard who relied on sending cheap paper booklets across the country, these postal and obscenity rules were the real legal minefield. The Comstock Act and Espionage-era regulations were federal law; the Post Office was a federal agency; and whether a particular title was “mailable” was ultimately decided in Washington, not Topeka. Kansas could decide not to prosecute Little Blue Books under its own obscenity statutes, but it could not force the Post Office to carry them or prevent federal indictments if an official decided they crossed the line.

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### 2.4 Why state-level protections could not neutralize federal power

Taken together, these layers explain why Kansas's relatively strong free-press clause could not, by itself, guarantee Haldeman-Julius a safe harbor.

First, as a matter of constitutional structure, state bills of rights bind state actors, not federal ones. Section 11 tells Kansas legislators, prosecutors, and judges that they may not abridge the "inviolate" liberty of the press except by punishing "abuse" under generally applicable laws such as libel. But it has no direct legal force against Congress, the Post Office Department, or federal prosecutors. The Supremacy Clause makes federal statutes and treaties "the supreme law of the land"; a state cannot give its citizens a right to violate federal obscenity or espionage laws, however generous its own constitution may be.

Second, once the Supreme Court began to incorporate the First Amendment against the states in cases such as Gitlow and Near, the direction of constraint ran from federal to state, not the other way around. Incorporation meant that Kansas could not go *below* the federal floor in restricting speech or the press, but it did not empower Kansas to set a higher binding standard that would limit Congress. When Kansas courts say that Section 11 and the First Amendment are "generally considered coextensive," they are signaling that they will not independently expand protection beyond federal doctrine in most cases, not that Kansas can somehow insulate Girard publishers from federal law.

Third, the domains in which Haldeman-Julius's risk was greatest—use of the mails, alleged interference with national defense, and obscenity—were precisely those in which federal power was most entrenched. Postal classifications and the definition of "non-mailable" matter were creatures of federal statute and Post Office regulations. The Espionage and Sedition Acts were explicitly national-security measures, enforced by federal courts. State officials could, at most, decline to assist or bring their own parallel prosecutions; they could not prevent a federal grand jury in another district from indicting a Kansas publisher if federal authorities chose to act.

Finally, the later Kansas obscenity case law underscores that the state itself was hardly a libertarian outlier. In A Quantity of Books v. Kansas, the Supreme Court reversed a Kansas Supreme Court decision and held that the state's mass seizure of books under its obscenity statute violated the First Amendment because the procedure failed to protect against the suppression of non-obscene materials. That episode, a decade after Haldeman-Julius's death, suggests that Kansas's formal constitutional language coexisted with a willingness to enforce obscenity laws quite aggressively.

In short, the "extra" or more emphatic free-press guarantees in the Kansas Bill of Rights mattered in the sense that they helped shape a local legal culture willing to tolerate a radical publisher in Girard. They did not matter in the sense of creating a legal shield against the

Comstock Act, postal censorship, or wartime speech prosecutions. For those, Haldeman-Julius lived under the same federal constraints as any other radical publisher in the United States—only with the practical advantage that, in his case, federal officials mostly chose not to pull the trigger.

**3. Little Balkans: Making a Radical Region in Southeast Kansas**

Before Girard became the return address on millions of Little Blue Books, it was part of a broader landscape that already sat uneasily inside Kansas. Crawford and Cherokee counties anchored the Weir–Pittsburg coalfield, which from the late 19th century onward drew tens of thousands of miners and their families into a compact corner of the state. The Kansas Historical Society describes how European workers from Italy, Austria-Hungary, Germany, England, Wales, France, and the Balkans poured into the area from the 1870s to work both shallow strip mines and deep shafts, making it an industrial center very unlike the wheat country that dominates Kansas's public image.

Outsiders, unnerved by ethnic diversity, strikes, and socialist agitation, began calling the region "Little Balkans," comparing its turbulence to the politically volatile southeastern European peninsula. The nickname was meant as an insult, a way to mark the mining district as alien to the rest of the state. Over time, however, local people embraced it as a shared identity and even institutionalized it in festivals and historical markers.

Within this landscape, coal, class, ethnicity, and politics intertwined. Mining companies created company towns and camps, extracted long hours from workers in dangerous conditions, and tried to maintain tight control over labor. Miners responded with unions, strikes, and a robust culture of mutual aid. Socialist organizers, including those connected with *Appeal to Reason*, circulated through these camps, and the political vocabulary of class struggle, exploitation, and workers' rights became part of everyday speech.

The result was not a uniformly radical population but a region where radicalism was *thinkable* and organized. Miners could read socialist papers, attend meetings, vote for socialist candidates, and send their children to radical schools without stepping outside the bounds of what their neighbors considered normal. That regional normalization of dissent is what made it possible for Girard, a small town in the middle of this ferment, to host first *Appeal to Reason* and later Haldeman-Julius's mass-market press.

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### 3.1 Coal, class, and conflict: mining towns and labor militancy

In physical terms, Little Balkans was built on a particular geology. Coal seams lay close to the surface in some places and deep under sandstone in others. Early residents dug coal by hand for home use, but by the 1870s and 1880s industrial companies were sinking shafts and opening large strip pits, turning Crawford and Cherokee counties into the leading coal-producing area of Kansas and, at times, a significant contributor to national supply.

Coal companies clustered dozens of mines around towns like Pittsburg, Weir, and Frontenac, building company housing, stores, and rudimentary social infrastructure. Camps ranged from rough shanties on dirt roads to more established company towns, but in either case the basic pattern was the same: long hours underground or in open pits; frequent injuries and deaths; and constant pressure to accept low wages and unsafe conditions in exchange for continued employment.

These conditions produced a sharp sense of class division. Owners and managers lived in relative comfort and often at some remove, while miners and their families inhabited precarious settlements vulnerable to layoffs, accidents, and company discipline. When coal prices fell or operators sought to cut costs, wages were reduced or mines idled. Miners quickly learned that individual bargaining power was minimal and that only collective action could extract concessions.

Strikes and lockouts became recurring features of life. The Kansas guide prepared by the Federal Writers' Project later summarized the area's early 20th-century history as a sequence of "prolonged labor unrest," noting that the mining district's politics distinguished it from other parts of the state. In this context, the presence of a large socialist newspaper in nearby Girard did not introduce conflict so much as give it a vocabulary and a national megaphone. The coalfield was already a crucible of class conflict; *Appeal to Reason* and, later, the Little Blue Books translated that conflict into print.

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### 3.2 Immigrant communities and the "Little Balkans" nickname

The labor militancy of the region was inseparable from its extraordinary ethnic mix. Local histories and county exhibits estimate that from the 1880s to the 1920s, more than fifty nationalities settled in southeast Kansas, drawn by mining jobs and related industries. Italians, Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, Slovaks, Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, French, Belgians, Welsh, and others all established enclaves in camp after camp. The Kansas Historical Society notes that workers from "dozens of European countries" shared both the mines and their traditions, reshaping local culture in the process.

It was this dense ethnic patchwork that inspired outsiders to call the area “Little Balkans,” invoking the Balkan peninsula as a metaphor for turbulence and foreignness. A Kansas legislator is often credited with using the phrase pejoratively, intending to brand the mining district as a troublesome, alien corner of the state. Newspaper writers and state politicians picked up the label, reinforcing the sense that this was a region apart—restive, volatile, and not quite “American” enough.

Inside the camps, however, diversity gradually became a practical fact of life. Different groups formed their own mutual-aid societies, churches, lodges, and cultural clubs, but they shared the same dangerous work and faced the same company power. In some strikes, ethnic divisions were exploited by owners; in others, they were partially overcome by shared class interests. Historians of the area emphasize that politics, rather than ethnicity alone, became a key distinguishing feature of Little Balkans, as socialist agitators and union organizers learned to speak across multiple languages and traditions.

Over time, the nickname itself was partially reclaimed. What had begun as a slur evolved into a local badge, memorialized in community festivals such as Little Balkans Days and in markers like the Miner’s Memorial and Immigrant Park in Pittsburg. For Haldeman-Julius’s purposes, the important point is not the label’s evolution but the underlying reality it described: a region where ethnic diversity and industrial labor combined to create a dense, politicized public, accustomed to hearing arguments about justice, exploitation, and rights.

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### 3.3 Unions, strikes, and the normalization of socialist rhetoric

As mining companies consolidated control, miners turned to unions as their primary tool of resistance. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and other organizations built locals throughout the coalfield, often in the face of fierce company opposition. Strikes in the 1890s and early 1900s, sometimes violent, gave workers direct experience with collective action and with the limits of employer and state tolerance. Company guards, strikebreakers, and, at times, state militia were familiar sights.

The Amazon Army, a 1921 protest in which hundreds of women—wives, mothers, and daughters of miners—marched against non-union labor and company practices, offers a striking example of how deeply union culture penetrated community life. Accounts describe some 500 women from roughly fifty nationalities confronting mine operators and strikebreakers, dramatizing both the diversity and the militancy of Little Balkans.

In this environment, socialist rhetoric did not sound exotic. The KU exhibit on radicalism in southeast Kansas highlights how workers organized political parties, newspapers, and unions to advance class-based demands, with *Appeal to Reason* as “an extremely important example” of

this broader ferment. A later socialist history notes that towns like Arma elected socialist officials and that school boards and local offices in the mining district occasionally fell into the hands of openly socialist candidates.

For miners and their families, terms like “capitalist,” “wage-slave,” and “class struggle” were part of ordinary political talk. Strike leaflets, union newspapers, and visiting speakers from the Socialist Party reinforced this vocabulary. The presence of *Appeal to Reason* in nearby Girard amplified that discourse, offering both ideological material and organizing news on a national scale. Socialist agitators and writers moved back and forth between the coal camps and the Girard newsroom, knitting together industrial conflict and radical print.

By the time Haldeman-Julius was mailing out Little Blue Books, the ground had already been prepared. A booklet on Marx, a tract on free thought, or a pamphlet discussing birth control did not land in a cultural vacuum. It entered a milieu where workers had long been told, and had witnessed, that the existing order was neither natural nor inevitable—and where printed arguments in that direction were part of the furniture of everyday life.

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**3.4 Freethought, anticlericalism, and religious pluralism in the coal camps**

Little Balkans was not only economically and ethnically diverse; it was also religiously mixed in a way that undermined the dominance of any single creed. Catholic churches served large Italian, Croatian, and Polish populations; Eastern Orthodox parishes and ethnic fraternal societies catered to Slavic groups; Protestant denominations of various stripes ministered to native-born and British-descended miners; and smaller congregations and sects dotted the camps.

This pluralism created both tensions and openings. Priests and pastors often opposed socialist organizing, warning their flocks against godless radicals. At the same time, some radicals drew on traditions of religious dissent and on anticlerical strands in European politics, especially among immigrants from regions where the church had been closely allied with oppressive regimes. The result was a complicated religious landscape in which piety and rebellion coexisted, sometimes in the same family.

The freethought tradition that later flourished in Haldeman-Julius’s Little Blue Books had local roots. *Appeal to Reason* published attacks on clerical hypocrisy and religious authority as part of its broader socialist critique, and the coal camps’ exposure to multiple faiths made simple identification of “Americanism” with any one church less plausible. A recent Kansas Reflector essay on Haldeman-Julius explicitly links the mining area’s “rich history of socialism” to an “explosion of free thought” that filled pockets and minds with cheap pamphlets challenging religious and social orthodoxies.

Anticlericalism was never universal, but it was visible enough that pamphlets on atheism, agnosticism, or liberal theology could find both enthusiastic audiences and fierce critics. For a publisher of controversial titles, this meant two things. First, there was a ready market for works that questioned dogma, since many readers had already encountered such questioning in political and workplace contexts. Second, there was enough religious diversity that no single institution could easily mobilize the entire region to suppress radical print.

Thus, when Haldeman-Julius used Girard as the launching pad for his freethought and sex-education titles, he was operating in a coalfield that had long contained both strong religious commitments and strong traditions of religious skepticism. Far from being an anomaly, his output can be seen as one more expression of the region's ongoing argument with itself about authority, morality, and the meaning of freedom.

## 4. Girard as a Socialist Print Hub

By the time Emanuel Haldeman-Julius arrived in 1915, Girard was already something like the Vatican City of American socialism. The town's status did not come from sheer size—it remained a small county seat—but from the presence of *Appeal to Reason*, the most successful socialist paper in U.S. history. What made Girard distinctive was not just that a radical newspaper happened to be printed there; it was that the town had been physically, economically, and symbolically reorganized around the production of that newspaper.

This section traces how *Appeal to Reason* turned Girard into a socialist print hub. It begins with Julius Wayland's decision to move his paper from Kansas City into the coalfield, then sketches the astonishing scale and reach the paper achieved. It then looks at the flow of visitors, lecturers, and campaigners who treated Girard as a movement center—a place to visit, see, and be seen. Finally, it examines the physical plant itself: the presses, workers, and postal infrastructure that made both *Appeal* and, later, the Little Blue Books possible.

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### 4.1 Julius Wayland and the founding of Appeal to Reason

Julius Augustus Wayland was already a veteran radical publisher before he ever set foot in Girard. He had edited *The Coming Nation* in Colorado and been involved in the Ruskin Colony experiment in Tennessee, both projects that combined utopian socialism with practical organizing. In 1895, settled in Kansas City, he launched a new four-page weekly, *Appeal to Reason*, at the urging of Mary "Mother" Jones and several white-collar workers who believed there was an audience for a plainspoken socialist paper.

The early *Appeal* was modest in scale but clear in tone: sharp headlines, punchy editorials, and a populist style that attacked monopolists, railroad barons, and political corruption. Subscriptions were initially fifty cents a year, sometimes reduced to twenty-five cents in promotional campaigns. Wayland's core conviction was that socialism could not remain the property of small sects; it had to be spoken in language that farmers and workers would recognize as their own.

In 1897, Wayland made the move that would fix Girard on the socialist map. He relocated the paper from Kansas City to Girard, a decision the KU "Radicalism in Southeast Kansas" exhibit interprets as a deliberate attempt to build on the region's existing radical sentiment. Girard sat on key rail lines in the heart of the coalfield, close to the "Little Balkans" mining communities and within reach of the populist farmers Wayland hoped to reach. Socialist theorist Laurence Gronlund reportedly called the town "ripe for socialism" despite (or because of) its otherwise conservative reputation.

The move also reflected Wayland's attitude toward independence. In Girard, printing and distribution costs were lower, and he could own the plant outright rather than relying on city printers. The physical separation from larger metropolitan centers gave him room to experiment—both politically and in business terms—without immediate interference from urban advertisers or hostile landlords. Within a few years, that gamble would transform both the paper and the town.

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**4.2 Appeal's circulation, influence, and symbolic role in national socialism**

From its new base in Girard, *Appeal to Reason* grew with extraordinary speed. By 1906 its paid circulation had climbed past a quarter-million; by 1910 it was printing around 550,000 copies a week, and contemporary accounts often cite figures of 700,000–760,000 at its pre-war peak, with special single-issue runs reaching as high as four million. That made it not only the leading socialist paper in the United States but one of the largest-circulation weeklies of any kind.

Several factors drove this reach. First was Wayland's "Appeal Army"—a network of volunteer subscription agents who canvassed friends, coworkers, and fellow union members, often rewarded with small prizes or public recognition. Second was the paper's content. *Appeal* offered a mix of movement news, sharp editorials, cartoons, and literary material. It commissioned Upton Sinclair to go undercover in Chicago's meatpacking plants, serializing what became *The Jungle* before its publication as a novel. It gave space to writers such as Eugene Debs, Jack London, Mother Jones, Kate Richards O'Hare, and Helen Keller, making Girard an unlikely hub for some of the era's most recognizable radical voices.

In symbolic terms, *Appeal to Reason* functioned as more than a newspaper. Historians regularly describe it as "the most important socialist newspaper in the history of American socialism," a paper that "was literally the only contact with socialism" for many isolated farmers and workers. For readers in small towns across the Plains and South, an issue of *Appeal* was often their only regular encounter with a coherent, nationwide socialist argument. The masthead "Girard, Kansas" thus became shorthand not just for a physical place but for a particular voice in national politics: caustic, populist, and unashamedly anti-capitalist.

Because of this role, Girard itself acquired a symbolic status. Socialist pamphlets and speeches of the period refer to *Appeal*'s headquarters as the "Temple of the Revolution," a phrase captured, for example, in a 1908 account of delegates visiting after the Socialist Party's national convention. To visit Girard was to visit the nerve center of the movement's printed word. That symbolic weight would long outlast *Appeal*'s peak circulation and help explain why later radicals, including Haldeman-Julius, chose to stay there rather than decamping to larger cities.

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**4.3 Visiting speakers, campaigns, and the town as pilgrimage site**

The combination of massive circulation and symbolic prestige turned Girard into a physical destination. Delegates leaving Socialist Party conventions diverted their routes in order to see the plant. Local accounts describe long lines of visitors touring the pressrooms, meeting editors, and posing for photographs.

Eugene Debs, the movement's most famous orator and five-time presidential candidate, had a particularly close relationship with the paper. He wrote a regular column for *Appeal* and used its pages to frame his national campaigns. A 1908 speech delivered in Girard, often titled "The Issue," shows him speaking at once to local citizens and to a wider readership, aware that his words would be printed and mailed from Girard out to hundreds of thousands of supporters. Debs's presence in town was news in itself; for miners and farmers, seeing him at the "home of the *Appeal*" tied their local struggles to national politics.

The *Appeal* lecture bureau organized speaking tours for staff writers and allied activists, with Girard as both staging ground and symbolic home port. Study clubs and reading circles sprang up across the country, often using *Appeal* editorials as discussion prompts, and some readers wrote of their desire to visit Girard at least once to see where "their paper" was made.

This traffic had practical effects on the town. Boarding houses, restaurants, and meeting halls became accustomed to hosting out-of-town radicals. Local residents, even those who disagreed with socialism, lived with a steady flow of visitors identifiable by their clothes, accents, and political conversations. The town's identity as "that socialist place in Kansas" meant that the

presence of a large radical printing operation was normalized in a way that would have been much harder in a more conventional county seat.

When Haldeman-Julius later used the same town as the base for the Little Blue Books, he inherited this quasi-pilgrimage culture. Visitors who might once have come to see the "Temple of the Revolution" now came to see the world's most prolific pamphlet factory. The continuity strengthened Girard's dual identity as both ordinary small town and extraordinary node in radical print networks.

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**4.4 The physical plant: presses, workers, and postal infrastructure**

Underlying all of this symbolism was a very concrete industrial apparatus. By 1910, *Appeal to Reason* employed around sixty workers in a building eighty by one hundred feet, two stories plus a basement—an imposing structure by small-town standards. At the heart of the operation was a three-deck straight-line Goss printing press, capable of turning out four hundred twelve-page papers per minute, in color and already folded if desired.

Such capacity demanded a disciplined workflow. Compositors set type, stereotypers prepared plates, press operators monitored the Goss machine, and mailing crews bundled, labeled, and loaded papers for shipment. Surviving photographs from the Pittsburg State University archives show workers melting metal and pouring round plates for use on the presses, underscoring the plant's resemblance to any other heavy industrial workplace.

Girard's location on rail lines made it an efficient node for distribution. Newspapers and, later, pamphlets could be loaded onto trains and dispatched in all directions with minimal delay. Just as important were the paper's second-class mailing privileges. These allowed *Appeal* to send out vast numbers of copies at subsidized postal rates—a crucial factor in sustaining a low subscription price and national reach. When Haldeman-Julius acquired the plant, he also inherited its established postal relationships and know-how.

The physical plant's capacity made the transition from newspaper to pamphlet publisher relatively straightforward. According to one library history, Haldeman-Julius purchased the *Appeal* press and subscriber list and, starting in 1919, began issuing his Little Blue Books on the same machinery, leveraging the same distribution channels. The presses that had once run twelve-page broadsheets now ran small stitched booklets; the workers who had wrapped newspapers now wrapped packets of inexpensive books.

This infrastructure also shaped what "free speech" meant in practice. The ability to exercise one's right to publish depended, in a very literal sense, on having access to a building of a certain size, a machine of a certain speed, a crew of trained workers, and a reliable rail-and-mail

interface. Kansans in other towns might enjoy the same constitutional right to speak and print, but without Girard's combination of industrial plant and postal integration, they could not have done what *Appeal to Reason* and later Haldeman-Julius did.

In that sense, Girard's role as a socialist print hub was not an accident of rhetoric or law alone. It was a specific industrial settlement—brick, steel, ink, and schedules—embedded in the "Little Balkans" coalfield and tuned for mass communication. When coupled with the region's radical culture and the state's generally tolerant stance, that physical plant turned a small Kansas town into a disproportionately powerful amplifier of dissenting voices.

## 5. People's College, Marian Wharton, and Radical Education

If *Appeal to Reason* made Girard the newspaper capital of American socialism, the People's College in nearby Fort Scott made southeast Kansas a laboratory for explicitly socialist mass education. Where *Appeal* translated socialist theory into newsprint and satire, the People's College tried to turn workers into confident readers, writers, and speakers who could hold their own in courts, councils, and party meetings.

At the center of that project stood Marian Wharton, a socialist feminist and teacher whose *Plain English* course became both the flagship of the College and the bridge between radical pedagogy and the mass-market pamphlets Haldeman-Julius would later publish. Her weekly lessons, always introduced with "Dear Comrade," treated language itself as a form of capital that workers needed to seize and master.

The People's College and Wharton's pedagogy did more than coexist alongside Girard's presses. They created a concrete demand for cheap, portable texts—and they gave Haldeman-Julius both the idea and the first large institutional customer for pocket-sized reprints of literature and freethought. In that sense, radical education was not an ornament to the Little Balkans region; it was one of the engines that turned a socialist newspaper plant into the world's most prolific pamphlet factory.

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### 5.1 The conception of a "college for the masses"

The People's College did not emerge out of nowhere. Its founders started with a simpler question: why were so many promising socialist militants shut out of offices and opportunities because they lacked formal schooling? In a much-cited letter to Socialist Party headquarters, Kansas organizer C. B. Hoffman described the spark: a boiler maker elected city attorney in Fort Scott had to resign because he could not meet the technical qualifications for the job. To Hoffman and fellow radicals such as J. I. Sheppard and Fred Warren (himself an editor at *Appeal*

*to Reason*), this humiliation dramatized a structural problem. Socialists were winning elections, but their rank-and-file had not been given the training traditionally reserved for lawyers, professionals, and the bourgeoisie.

The first response was narrow but telling: under the auspices of *Appeal to Reason*, they organized law classes delivered by correspondence, quickly enrolling thousands of students scattered across the country. Within a few years, however, they concluded that legal knowledge alone was not enough. If socialism was to become a governing force, workers needed much broader training in English, public speaking, and the practical skills required for office and organization.

So, in 1914, they founded the People's College in Fort Scott as a "college for the masses," explicitly funded by working-class socialist donations rather than wealthy patrons or church bodies. The school initially operated out of a large Victorian house in town, with plans to develop a residential campus on nearby land that contained coal, lime, and clay; students would work the land and associated industries to support their studies. Eugene Debs accepted the largely honorary title of chancellor, lending national prestige and affirming that the College was part of the broader movement, not a local anomaly.

In concept, then, the People's College was a socialist answer to elite universities and commercial correspondence schools. Mainstream extension institutions like LaSalle in Chicago offered law and business courses for individual advancement; the People's College offered law, English, and public speaking for collective emancipation, pitched to farmers, machinists, and miners who might never set foot on an Ivy League campus but who could, with the right training, become city attorneys, legislators, or movement organizers.

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**5.2 Correspondence courses, rhetoric, and Plain English for workers**

If the People's College was the institution, *Plain English* was its voice. Written by Marian Wharton and published in 1917 as the text for the College's thirty-week English course, the book announced itself on the title page as "for the education of the workers by the workers." The preface framed mastery of language as both an ethical and political vocation: the aspiring speaker must "consecrate himself completely to some great cause," and the greatest cause was humanity itself.

Wharton's weekly lessons combined grammar, vocabulary building, and composition exercises with explicit reflections on power. The accompanying "Dear Comrade" letters that prefaced each chapter, reproduced in the People's College News, drew analogies between language and capital: just as capital in the hands of the boss could be used to dominate workers, so language in the hands of a ruling class could define the terms of debate and make exploitation appear

natural. Workers, she argued, needed to reclaim both the tools and the authority to name their world.

Scholars of Wharton's work have pointed out how unusual this was in the context of early 20th-century composition teaching. Rather than presenting English as neutral correctness, Wharton grounded her pedagogy in a blend of Marxist social analysis and pragmatist educational theory, drawing on figures like Karl Marx and John Dewey to argue that thought and language evolve through action and struggle. The result was a kind of critical workers' rhetoric: drills in sentence structure and word choice always pointed back toward the capacity to speak and write as a socialist citizen.

The detailed weekly regimen—new vocabulary lists, daily practice sentences, exhortations to use new words in conversation—reflected the realities of the intended audience. Students might be working ten hours a day in mines, factories, or on farms; they needed structured, bite-sized work that could be fitted into evenings and weekends. The correspondence format meant that each lesson arrived by post with a personal letter attached, turning the textbook into an ongoing dialogue between a comrade-teacher and scattered worker-students.

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**5.3 Prisoners, miners, and distant students as imagined audience**

From the beginning, the People's College defined its student body more by class position than by geography. A 1915 survey of students reported in the College's newsletter found that farmers and machinists predominated among enrollees; only one respondent held a job "which does not contribute to economic wealth." A notable six were incarcerated in penitentiaries, making "an opportunity out of their enforced confinement."

Within a year, the College boasted students in the Panama Canal Zone, Hawaii, Alaska, most U.S. states, and several Canadian provinces, with the Southeast the one region lagging behind. The average age hovered around twenty-nine, suggesting that the typical student was neither a traditional adolescent undergraduate nor an elderly autodidact but a young adult in the thick of working life.

Letters from students testify to how they understood the course. A railroad bridge laborer praised the English curriculum as "plain, simple, and to the point," saying that it gave him "inspiration and great hope." Another student wrote that completing the combined *Plain English* course had her "wholehearted approval and support," signing off with the formula "Yours for the education of the worker which means his freedom." These phrases were more than politeness; they reflected the College's insistence that education was not an individual ornament but a collective weapon.

The imagined classroom, then, included miners from Little Balkans, tenant farmers from the Plains, machinists in Midwestern shops, and prisoners using correspondence lessons to turn prison time into study time. The letters and lessons assumed this scattered but solidaristic audience, consistently addressing "Dear Comrade" rather than "Dear Student" and closing with "Yours for Freedom" or "Yours for Education."

This mental map mattered for Girard as well. The people reading *Appeal to Reason* in coal towns and farmhouses were the same people enrolling at the People's College. The region's radical print and radical school shared not just geography but a common public: workers hungry for tools to interpret their world and intervene in it.

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**5.4 How People's College created demand for cheap, portable texts**

The link between the People's College and Haldeman-Julius's later publishing empire was not only ideological; it was practical and commercial. According to multiple accounts from librarians and local historians, the immediate impetus for what became the Little Blue Books was a request from Marian Wharton herself. As head of the English department at the People's College, she approached Haldeman-Julius to ask whether he could print inexpensive editions of literary works for use in her classes.

Fort Scott lay only some thirty miles from Girard, and Wharton already had ties to the *Appeal* world. For a publisher who had just taken over a powerful press plant and a huge mailing list, the request was both a challenge and an opportunity. Haldeman-Julius responded by offering a series of fifty pocket-sized books—mixing socialist tracts and classic literature—to *Appeal* subscribers at a bundled price of five dollars. Reports from the period say that five thousand orders arrived in the first week alone.

In retrospect, this experiment looks like a market test for the Little Blue Book model. The People's College provided the initial guaranteed demand: a socialist college that needed bulk quantities of affordable texts suitable for working-class students. The *Appeal* subscriber base provided the test market: a national readership predisposed to buy self-education tools. When both responded enthusiastically, the logic of the enterprise changed. Instead of thinking primarily in terms of a newspaper and a few auxiliary series, Haldeman-Julius began to think in terms of a continuous stream of cheap books, each with its own number, covering every subject from Shakespeare to sex hygiene.

In this way, the College's radical pedagogy directly shaped Girard's publishing trajectory. Wharton's *Plain English* assumed that workers needed manageable texts they could carry to the mine, the workshop, or the kitchen table and read in short bursts. The request she made—

“inexpensive copies of literature”—translated that assumption into a concrete production specification: small, cheap, and durable.

Once those books existed, they exceeded their initial classroom function. Miners could buy them by mail; prisoners could have them sent to cells; farmers’ children could collect them in shoebox libraries. The People’s College had imagined a geographically dispersed but class-conscious student body; the Little Blue Books gave that imagined public a scalable, tangible form.

Thus, when we speak of Girard as a socialist print hub, we have to include Fort Scott and the People’s College in the picture. The law classes born under the wing of *Appeal to Reason*, the socialist “college for the masses,” and Marian Wharton’s critical composition pedagogy did not simply coexist with Haldeman-Julius’s operation. They helped to define his audience, clarified what kinds of texts were needed, and catalyzed the very idea of pocket-sized, mass-market literature. Radical education, in other words, was one of the hidden engines of radical publishing on the Kansas prairie.

## 6. From Appeal to Little Blue Books: Haldeman-Julius in Context

By the time Emanuel Haldeman-Julius took control of the *Appeal to Reason* plant, the newspaper was a fading institution and the socialist movement that had sustained it was under sustained pressure. Rather than abandoning Girard or trying to revive the old model, he treated the plant, the subscriber list, and the town’s radical reputation as raw materials for a new experiment. The result was a shift from weekly agitation to continuous, small-unit publication—thousands of titles, hundreds of millions of copies, covering everything from Voltaire to venereal disease.

Understanding this shift is crucial to the larger argument of the article. It shows that Haldeman-Julius was not simply a courageous individual operating in a vacuum, but a figure who inherited a specific apparatus and then reoriented it around a different set of editorial and commercial priorities. Where *Appeal* had supplied weekly ideological framing, the Little (and Big) Blue Books supplied a loosely organized library of rationalism, self-help, sex information, and literary classics that could be assembled piecemeal in workers’ pockets and kitchen drawers. Girard remained the point of origin; what changed was the way its presses were used.

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### 6.1 Buying into the Appeal operation and repurposing its machinery

When Haldeman-Julius arrived in Girard in 1915, he came as an editor and journalist, not as an owner. He worked for *Appeal to Reason* in its declining years, watching as the combination of

wartime repression, internal splits, and the general ebb of socialism in the United States eroded the paper's circulation and finances. The plant remained formidable, but the revenue stream that had once justified its existence was no longer secure.

In 1919, using funds supplied by his wife, Marcet Haldeman (herself from a prominent Midwestern family), he purchased the *Appeal* operation outright. The acquisition included more than bricks and machinery. It brought with it the paper's subscriber list—still numbering in the hundreds of thousands—and the goodwill attached to Girard as a known source of radical print. He renamed the paper, first as the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly* and later as the *American Freeman*, but the weekly format no longer stood at the center of his plans. The key asset, in his own retrospective telling, was not the title but the plant and the names.

The first step in repurposing that asset was modest but revealing. Rather than investing in a few large, expensive volumes, he began issuing small pamphlets under names like Appeal Pocket Series, People's Pocket Series, and Ten Cent Pocket Series. These early efforts combined classic literature, socialist tracts, and popular-interest material in a format that could be produced rapidly on existing equipment. The presses that had once printed twelve-page newspapers on reels now ran off short stitched booklets on lighter paper; the mailing operations that had handled bundles of weeklies now handled packets of pocket books.

This transition was not instantaneous. For several years, the weekly paper and the emerging booklet series coexisted, sharing machinery and staff. But as orders for the small books grew—and as the economics of cheap, high-volume pamphleteering became clearer—the balance shifted. The newspaper arm became progressively less central, while the pocket series evolved into the Little Blue Books. The important contextual point is that none of this would have been possible without buying into a pre-existing industrial and postal apparatus. Haldeman-Julius did not build a print shop from scratch; he redirected one that had been optimized for socialist agitation into a platform for mass micro-publication.

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**6.2 Editorial lines: freethought, sex, self-help, and everyday philosophy**

If the plant and subscriber list provided the material basis for the Little Blue Books, editorial line provided their distinctive character. Haldeman-Julius did not simply publish "books" in the abstract. He curated an evolving mix of content that reflected both his own commitments and his reading of the market. Four broad strands are especially relevant to the question of free speech: freethought, sex and personal relations, self-help and practical skills, and an accessible "everyday philosophy."

Freethought was a constant. From the beginning, the series included brisk biographies of religious skeptics, critiques of the Bible, popular introductions to science as an alternative to

revelation, and the work of authors such as Joseph McCabe, whose Key to Culture essays later expanded into larger blue-covered formats. Anti-clericalism, atheism, and rationalist ethics appeared not as isolated provocations but as recurring themes, normalized by their placement alongside classics of literature and history. A reader ordering a handful of titles might receive, in the same packet, a Shakespeare play, a life of Voltaire, and a concise argument against immortality.

Sex and personal relations formed a second major line, especially as the business matured. Titles on sex hygiene, birth control, marriage, divorce, and sexual technique appeared under both the Little and Big Blue Book imprints. Some were written by physicians or sexologists in a clinical tone; others adopted a more conversational or advisory style, promising to help readers understand their bodies, their partners, and the social constraints around them. In many cases, these books were framed as educational or reformist rather than titillating—an important distinction in an era when Comstock-derived obscenity law hinged on whether material appealed to "prurient interest" or served some higher purpose.

Self-help and practical guides constituted a third strand. There were booklets on how to speak in public, how to write clearly, how to save and invest on a small income, how to repair household items, and how to navigate daily life more effectively. These titles echoed, in a more individualist register, the earlier collective ambitions of the People's College. Where Marian Wharton's *Plain English* course had aimed to equip workers for public office and movement leadership, the Little Blue Book manuals aimed to equip them for personal advancement and competence, though always with an undercurrent of skepticism toward established authorities.

Finally, there was a broad category that might be called everyday philosophy. These were short essays on happiness, pessimism, laughter, fear, and the meaning of life, sometimes written by Haldeman-Julius himself, sometimes by collaborators. They blended elements of stoicism, secular humanism, and pragmatic common sense, often stripped of explicit socialist rhetoric but retaining a fundamental suspicion of inherited dogma. The underlying message was that ordinary readers were capable of thinking about ultimate questions without clerical or academic mediation.

Taken together, these lines of content placed the enterprise somewhere between a working-class library, a freethought tract society, a sex-education clinic, and a self-help publisher. That hybridity is central to its historical significance. It also explains why Haldeman-Julius attracted surveillance and criticism from multiple directions: religious authorities resented the rationalism; moral reformers feared the sex titles; some old-line socialists lamented the drift from explicit class agitation toward personal cultivation.

### 6.3 Pricing, format, and the democratization of reading material

The physical format and pricing of the Little Blue Books were not incidental details; they were central to their role in democratizing access to print. Haldeman-Julius standardized a small, staple-bound booklet roughly three and a half by five inches, printed on low-grade pulp paper and wrapped in a simple colored cover that eventually settled, for branding purposes, on blue. The size was chosen so that the books would fit easily into a trouser pocket, a shirt pocket, a handbag, or a small coat. They were, in his own words, a "pocket university," designed to accompany a working person on a streetcar, a lunch break, or an evening by the stove.

Pricing evolved as economies of scale kicked in. Early pocket series volumes cost between ten and twenty-five cents, already cheaper than most bound books. As print runs increased and production efficiencies improved, the price dropped to ten cents, then to five cents a copy. For long stretches of the 1920s and 1930s, a reader could buy a Little Blue Book for a nickel—the price of a newspaper, a cheap cigar, or a basic food item. The slogan "democracy for a dime" was only a slight exaggeration.

Distribution methods reinforced this logic. The primary channel was mail-order: advertisements listing hundreds of numbered titles appeared in newspapers and magazines, and readers sent in small sums for assortments or for specific numbers. Minimum orders simplified the handling of small change; bundles of twenty or fifty books were common. But Haldeman-Julius also experimented with vending machines, drugstore racks, and nontraditional outlets where impulse purchases could occur. The idea was to make the presence of cheap booklets as ubiquitous as candy bars or cigarettes.

Editorial and marketing tactics worked hand in hand with format. Titles were often bluntly descriptive ("How to Improve Your Memory," "What Every Married Person Should Know") or deliberately sensational ("A French Prostitute's Sacrifice" instead of a more neutral "The Tallow Ball"). When a subject failed to sell, it might be retitled or repackaged rather than discarded. The goal was not to produce a canon bound in leather, but to maximize the number of doors into reading—doors labeled, sometimes provocatively, for topics that readers already felt curious or anxious about.

The cumulative effect was to lower the threshold for engaging with ideas that had previously been the preserve of the educated or the well-to-do. A miner or factory worker who hesitated to commit to a thick volume of philosophy might risk a nickel on "Nietzsche in Brief" or "Voltaire's Best Pages." Someone embarrassed to inquire about sexual matters at a pharmacy could quietly order a booklet on sex hygiene by mail. The democratizing claim here is not that Little Blue Books provided a comprehensive or always careful education. It is that they made

entry into a world of secular, critical, and sometimes forbidden knowledge cheap, portable, and relatively low-risk.

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**6.4 Navigating the edge: how far he pushed taboo topics**

Given this mix of freethought, sex, and self-help, the question is not whether Haldeman-Julius pushed against contemporary taboos, but how far—and with what strategies. His career offers a case study in navigating the edge of obscenity and blasphemy law without tipping into the territory that invited immediate suppression.

One tactic was to frame controversial subjects in the language of education and reform. Sex titles were billed as guides to hygiene, marital harmony, or psychological insight. Authors with professional credentials—physicians, psychologists, sexologists—were prominently credited. Prefaces stressed the avoidance of prurience and the goal of equipping readers with knowledge that would protect them from quacks, exploitation, or misery. In this way, topics that might otherwise have been dismissed as obscene could be defended as having scientific or social value, an argument that later dovetailed with national obscenity doctrine's emphasis on "redeeming social importance" and "serious" value.

A second tactic was to embed the most provocative material in a much larger catalogue of respectable or canonical works. A postal inspector or prosecutor scanning a list of Little Blue Book titles would find the Bible, Shakespeare, Plato, Dickens, and Lincoln alongside essays on atheism, birth control, and sexual technique. This did not render the latter invisible, but it complicated any portrayal of the firm as a mere peddler of smut. The company could present itself as a general-education publisher with a few forward-looking titles, rather than as a specialized erotica house.

Third, Haldeman-Julius appears to have practiced a certain amount of internal line-drawing. There is little evidence that he published material designed solely to shock or arouse without any pretense of educational or literary merit. The boundary he tested was between frankness and propriety, not between legality and outright pornography. This does not mean that all his sex titles would pass modern standards of sensitivity or scientific accuracy. It does mean that the enterprise as a whole was organized around a rough ideal of enlightenment rather than around the cultivation of prurient interest for its own sake.

Even with these strategies, he attracted attention. Moral reformers and religious leaders denounced his freethought and sex titles as attacks on faith and decency. Postal authorities questioned the mailability of specific books and sometimes warned or penalized the firm. Later, as the business passed to his son, more aggressive obscenity prosecutions would be mounted against the Big Blue Books, some of which treated homosexuality and other then-taboo subjects

with a directness that authorities found intolerable. The earlier period of relative freedom looks, in retrospect, less like a permanent settlement and more like a window in which a particular combination of law, culture, and institutional caution allowed the Girard operation to run near the edge without being thrown off.

In this sense, Haldeman-Julius's editorial judgment cannot be separated from the broader themes of the article. His ability to push taboo topics depended on a physical plant that allowed cheap experimentation, a pricing model that made misfires survivable, a local culture willing to tolerate a certain amount of scandal, and a national legal environment in which the lines around obscenity and blasphemy were contested but not yet fully hardened. He did not operate under "extra" free speech laws, but he did occupy a narrow zone where the risks of frankness seemed manageable. The width of that zone, and its eventual narrowing, are as much a part of his story as his own tastes and convictions.

## 7. Law Versus Local Culture: What Actually Protected Him?

### 7.1 Kansas on paper: ordinary protection, not extraordinary license

On the face of it, Kansas looked like a particularly friendly jurisdiction for someone in Haldeman-Julius's line of work. Since statehood, the Kansas Bill of Rights has declared that "the liberty of the press shall be inviolate; and all persons may freely speak, write or publish their sentiments on all subjects, being responsible for the abuse of such rights." The phrasing is strong, and later generations of Kansas lawyers and legislators would proudly point to that "inviolate" language as evidence of a robust free-press tradition.

But as courts and commentators have repeatedly noted, the Kansas provision has generally been interpreted as coextensive with the federal First Amendment, not as a special super-shield that goes beyond national baselines. State supreme court decisions in the twentieth century tended to read Section 11 in lockstep with federal doctrine: whatever Washington permitted or forbade, Topeka would usually follow. At the same time, Kansas, like other states, retained its own obscenity and "morals" statutes, updated periodically but aimed at suppressing sexually explicit or "lewd" material.

So in strictly legal terms, Haldeman-Julius operated under what might be called ordinary American conditions: a formally strong but judicially qualified free-press guarantee, coupled with criminal and regulatory tools that could be directed against radical or sexual material when officials chose to use them. Nothing in Kansas law turned Girard into a special zone of immunity. What mattered was not an "extra" state-level license to speak, but how those ordinary tools were—or were not—wielded in a particular town, by particular officials, against a very particular kind of publisher.

### 7.2 Girard in practice: social tolerance and selective enforcement

If Kansas law on paper looked fairly standard, Girard's culture did not. By the time Haldeman-Julius arrived to work for the Appeal to Reason in 1915, the town had already spent two decades as a magnet for socialists, freethinkers, and labor organizers. Cheap land, nearby coal camps, and a large immigrant working class gave the region its "Little Balkans" reputation, and the Appeal's success made Girard a small but visible node in the national radical network.

That history mattered when it came to enforcement. Local officials, merchants, and even many church-goers were used to seeing socialist newspapers, anticlerical pamphlets, and "advanced" literature circulating through the mails and across counters. The presses and the postal depot were major employers. The town's reputation as a hub for radical print culture brought visitors, speakers, and a low-grade but persistent trickle of money and prestige. Shutting down a publisher like Haldeman-Julius would not simply have been a moral gesture; it would have meant attacking part of the local economy and identity.

The result was a pattern of selective enforcement and local tolerance. Girard was by no means uniformly radical—there were conservative businessmen, devout Protestants, and loyal Republicans—but the balance of forces meant that a publisher of skepticism, socialism, and frank sex education could operate without constant fear of the county attorney or the town marshal. Complaints surely occurred, and some titles were controversial even among sympathetic readers. But as long as the operation was broadly legal, paid its taxes, and did not directly scandalize local sensibilities, many potential enforcers simply looked the other way or treated Little Blue Books as just another piece of the town's odd fame.

### 7.3 Federal scrutiny and the limits of local shelter

The real danger came from outside Kansas altogether. For most of Haldeman-Julius's career, the primary legal threats to radical and sexual print culture came from federal law, federal courts, and especially federal administrators using the postal power. Nineteenth-century obscenity rules had been consolidated in the Comstock Act, which barred "obscene, lewd, or lascivious" material, as well as birth-control information, from the mails. Later, wartime measures like the Espionage Act and the atmosphere of the Red Scare gave postal officials and federal prosecutors additional tools to harass dissenting publishers.

Girard saw this head-on. The Appeal to Reason's circulation had already drawn federal hostility; an editor was convicted on obscenity charges after describing "degenerate practices" at Leavenworth prison, and during and after World War I the paper was hit with slander and obscenity cases and ultimately lost its second-class mailing rights following anti-militarist editorials. That episode underscored a key fact: however tolerant local juries might be, second-class status—crucial for cheap nationwide circulation—was granted and revoked in Washington.

Haldeman-Julius learned from that history. The Little Blue Book series mixed canonical literature with rationalist tracts and sex education, and the sex titles were often framed as "information" or "hygiene" rather than prurient entertainment. But this did not place him beyond reach. Postal inspectors and moral reformers at various points complained about the content of his sex pamphlets, and by mid-century the FBI had him on its enemies list, treating his combination of socialism, atheism, and sexuality as a national problem rather than a Kansas curiosity.

Kansas's constitutional promise that the press was "inviolate" did nothing to stop federal postal censorship or FBI surveillance. Nor could a friendly Girard postmaster or county attorney veto an instruction from higher up the chain. A federal grand jury could indict a Girard publisher regardless of what the town thought, and in the end it was a federal tax-evasion case—not any state obscenity prosecution—that brought Haldeman-Julius to the brink of prison in 1951.

**7.4 Case sketches: conflicts, complaints, and near-misses**

A few specific episodes help clarify how law and local culture interacted around Haldeman-Julius and his predecessors.

First, the Appeal to Reason itself serves as a cautionary precedent. Its obscenity conviction over a prison exposé and the later loss of second-class mailing status after anti-war editorials show that radical publishers in Girard could indeed be punished, but that the key blows tended to come from federal authorities enforcing national standards. Local readers might rally around the paper; local officials might sympathize or at least abstain. None of that prevented federal courts and postal officials from treating the paper as a problem to be disciplined.

Second, the evolution of Little Blue Book content—especially the growth of sex-education and sexology titles in the 1930s and 1940s—provoked recurring friction with moral guardians. Many of the more explicit pamphlets were written by physicians and sexologists such as David Oliver Cauldwell, whose monographs on sexual behavior and identity were published as Big Blue or Little Blue Books. Postal officials and anti-obscenity activists periodically targeted such material as beyond the bounds of protected speech, and contemporaries noted that Haldeman-Julius had "difficulty with the courts because of the alleged publication of obscenity."

Yet these clashes rarely escalated into landmark Supreme Court cases or prolonged imprisonment. Instead, they tended to produce a pattern of warnings, threatened prosecutions, and occasionally charges that fizzled or were resolved without sweeping precedents. Haldeman-Julius adjusted titles, prefatory notes, and advertising copy to emphasize the educational and medical nature of controversial books, and he kept issuing them from Girard, suggesting that the combination of legal ambiguity, local support, and sheer volume of mail made it difficult for censors to mount a decisive, sustained attack.

Finally, events after his death throw the balance into sharper relief. In 1964, his son Henry J. Haldeman was prosecuted in Kansas over the sale of sex-information Big Blue Books by Cauldwell, a case that has since been remembered in discussions of Kansas obscenity law. By then, the national sexual landscape had shifted, but so had the politics of obscenity enforcement. The fact that a Haldeman-run operation could be dragged into court within Kansas itself, over material very much in continuity with the father's catalogue, underscores that state law had always contained the tools to punish such publications. Whether those tools were used depended less on any special "extra" free-speech guarantee and more on who held office, which titles drew attention, and how local and national politics aligned in a given moment.

Taken together, these sketches suggest that what "protected" Haldeman-Julius was never a unique Kansas legal dispensation. On the legal side, he benefited from the same evolving First Amendment doctrines that gradually narrowed federal obscenity law and from the absence, in his own lifetime, of a decisive state campaign against his catalogue. On the cultural side, he operated in a town and region where radical print was woven into the local economy and identity, making officials hesitant to turn him into a test case. The tension between those two levels—ordinary law, extraordinary local culture—runs through his career, and it is in that tension, rather than in any special statute, that his relative freedom to publish from Girard is best understood.

**8. Afterlives: Censorship, Obscenity, and Kansas in the Mid-Century**

By the time Emanuel Haldeman-Julius died in 1951, the institutional world that had made Girard such a hospitable place for cheap radical print was already changing. The postwar Red Scare narrowed the acceptable range of political expression; sexual expression, meanwhile, became the main front in censorship battles that had once centered on sedition and blasphemy. In this new climate, Kansas played a paradoxical role. On the one hand, it became the site of some of the most aggressive attempts to suppress allegedly obscene material. On the other, those very attempts produced court decisions and publicity that strengthened procedural safeguards for publishers and helped fix Haldeman-Julius and his successors in the historical imagination as pioneers of free expression.

The story of the Little Blue Books therefore has a double afterlife. Legally, Kansas emerges in the 1950s and 1960s as a testing ground for obscenity doctrine, culminating in A Quantity of Books v. Kansas and the later prosecution of Henry J. Haldeman over the sexological "Big Blue Books." Culturally and historically, mid-century and later commentators begin to build a retrospective narrative in which southeast Kansas is remembered less as a site of raids and prosecutions and more as the unlikely birthplace of a mass "explosion of free thought." The tension between

these two afterlives—Kansas as censor and Kansas as cradle of radical literacy—frames this section.

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**8.1 Later obscenity battles and A Quantity of Books v. Kansas**

The most famous mid-century Kansas obscenity case did not involve Little or Big Blue Books at all, but rather a mass seizure of paperback erotica from a Wichita bookshop. In 1960 the Kansas attorney general, acting under a state statute that allowed ex parte forfeiture proceedings against obscene material, obtained a court order to seize 1,715 copies of thirty-one titles with lurid covers and suggestive content. The books bore names like Lust Pool and Sex Life of a Cop and had been published by Nightstand Books and other "sleaze" houses that flourished on the margins of the paperback revolution.

The Kansas courts upheld the seizure and destruction order. When the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court as *A Quantity of Books v. Kansas* (1964), however, a plurality reversed—not because the justices deemed the paperbacks wholesome, but because the procedure used to condemn them was incompatible with the First Amendment. Mass seizure and forfeiture of books, the Court held, could not proceed on an ex parte basis. Before any state could destroy stock in bulk, there had to be a prompt, adversary determination of obscenity, with the publisher or bookseller given a meaningful chance to argue that at least some of the seized material was protected.

In doctrinal terms, *A Quantity of Books* was a procedural decision about prior restraint, not a ringing endorsement of sexual expression. Yet the optics mattered. The case framed Kansas as a state whose law-enforcement officials were prepared to confiscate whole inventories of books in one swoop, and it placed that zeal in tension with the state's own constitutional guarantee that the liberty of the press should be "inviolate." At the same time, the Supreme Court's rebuke helped shore up protections that would indirectly benefit any publisher—or mail-order book operation—trying to navigate the shifting obscenity landscape of the 1960s.

Seen from Girard, the irony is obvious. A state that had once hosted *Appeal to Reason* and the vast Little Blue Book plant was now the jurisdiction whose overreach forced the Supreme Court to articulate stricter procedural safeguards against the destruction of books. The legal afterlife of radical Kansas publishing thus included not only the memory of courageous pamphleteers but also the record of a state that had to be told, by the federal courts, how far it could go in suppressing printed matter.

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### 8.2 Shifts in national doctrine on obscenity and speech

The Kansas cases of the 1960s unfolded against a rapidly changing national doctrine on obscenity. In 1957, *Roth v. United States* announced that obscene material was categorically outside the protection of the First Amendment, but also tried to narrow what counted as obscene. The Court defined obscenity as material which, "to the average person, applying contemporary community standards," appeals to a prurient interest in sex and is "utterly without redeeming social importance." This test left much room for argument about what counted as "redeeming social value"—a phrase that would become crucial for scientific, educational, or reformist treatments of sexuality.

By the mid-1960s, decisions such as *Jacobellis v. Ohio* and *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* were struggling to apply *Roth* while admitting that hard-and-fast lines were elusive. In *Memoirs*, a plurality held that Cleland's eighteenth-century erotic novel *Fanny Hill* could not be banned, in part because it possessed some redeeming literary value and thus failed the "utterly without redeeming social value" prong. Justice Potter Stewart's famous remark in *Jacobellis*—"I know it when I see it"—captured the uneasy mix of moral judgment and legal doctrine that characterized this period.

Kansas actors had to operate within this unstable framework. When Henry J. Haldeman, Emanuel's son, continued the family business with larger format "Big Blue Books," some of which dealt with sexology and frank discussions of homosexuality, reproduction, and marital relations by authors such as David O. Cauldwell, they quickly drew the attention of federal postal inspectors and prosecutors. Pollak's reconstruction of the 1964 trial notes that Haldeman was indicted under federal obscenity statutes for mailing allegedly obscene books and that the case effectively pushed the firm toward closure.

Yet on appeal the Tenth Circuit applied *Roth* and its progeny to scrutinize whether the books, taken as a whole, truly lacked redeeming social value. The court acknowledged that the publications were clinical, sometimes blunt, but also contained educational and scientific content. In light of emerging national standards, the judges concluded that at least some of the material could not be summarily condemned as obscene. The same legal evolution that permitted Kansas and federal authorities to target the Haldeman-Julius enterprise thus also provided the doctrinal tools by which convictions could be reversed or sentences mitigated.

The culmination of this line of cases was *Miller v. California* (1973), which replaced *Roth*'s "utterly without redeeming social value" requirement with a new three-part test. Under *Miller*, material is obscene only if it appeals to prurient interest, depicts sexual conduct in a patently offensive way as defined by state law, and, taken as a whole, lacks "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." While *Miller* gave states somewhat more leeway to tailor their

obscenity statutes, its explicit "serious value" prong offered a clearer safe harbor for works—like many Little and Big Blue Books—that mixed forthright discussion of sex with education, literature, or social criticism.

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**8.3 Retrospective myth-making about "free Kansas" and radical publishing**

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a second afterlife of the Haldeman-Julius project took shape—not in courtrooms, but in historical writing and regional memory. Commentators began to emphasize the sheer scale and audacity of printing millions of cheap books on freethought, socialism, sex, and world literature from a town of 2,500 people in southeast Kansas. Time magazine, retrospective essays, and local histories revived the image of Girard as a kind of "cerulean stream" of inexpensive literacy flowing from the prairie.

Contemporary Kansas writers have leaned into this story. A 2025 Kansas Reflector column, for example, describes the Little Blue Books as an "explosion of free thought" that "burst from Kansas" and "filled pockets — and minds," framing the Girard plant as evidence that a supposedly conservative state could incubate a radically democratic print culture. Another Reflector piece on Kansas radicalism more broadly situates *Appeal to Reason* and the Little Blue Books alongside Populists, temperance crusaders, civil-rights organizers, and even reactionary movements, arguing that the state's history encompasses "radical activists of all stripes."

In this retrospective narrative, Kansas appears as a place where free speech flourished remarkably early, almost in defiance of national stereotypes. The taxation case that once threatened Haldeman-Julius, the postal skirmishes over atheist tracts, and the later obscenity prosecutions of his son fade into the background. What remains in popular memory is the notion that a tiny town on the radical prairie proved that ordinary people could carry pocket-sized classics and anticlerical essays in their overalls or handbags—and that the state somehow allowed, or even encouraged, this experiment.

The resulting myth is not entirely false. The combination of a robust state press clause, a sympathetic county attorney, radical neighbors, and a degree of "strategic invisibility" did help shield Haldeman-Julius during his most productive years. But it can easily slide into an overly rosy picture of "free Kansas," obscuring the fact that the same jurisdiction later generated headline-grabbing obscenity seizures and criminal trials. A nuanced account of the afterlives of the Little Blue Books must hold both images together: Kansas as radical incubator and Kansas as censorious prosecutor.

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### 8.4 Haldeman-Julius's legacy in contemporary free-speech memory

Within contemporary free-speech and print-culture memory, Haldeman-Julius occupies an ambiguous but suggestive place. He is not cited alongside the canonical First Amendment litigants who gave their names to landmark Supreme Court decisions. Rather, he appears most frequently in three overlapping contexts: as a pioneer of mass adult education; as a freethinker who pushed the limits of religious and sexual respectability; and as the progenitor of a family firm that ultimately collided with mid-century obscenity law.

Scholars of popular culture and radical print have emphasized the democratizing dimension of his project: hundreds of millions of booklets sold, many to workers, immigrants, and rural readers who had no easy access to libraries or universities. Kansas-based archives and exhibitions reinforce this image, presenting the Little Blue Books as a "university in print" and Girard as a hub of self-education. The Kansas Historical Society and regional universities preserve his papers and printing ephemera, while the books themselves circulate today as collectible artifacts and digitized scans on library websites.

At the same time, legal historians and local chroniclers of obscenity controversies have begun to connect the dots between his freethought and sex-education titles and the later prosecution of Henry J. Haldeman. Pollak's study of the 1964 trial argues that Kansas authorities, working with federal law enforcement, effectively used obscenity charges to finish off a company already weakened by changing markets and the founder's death.Invalid URL In this telling, the Haldeman-Julius enterprise becomes a cautionary example of how fragile radical publishing can be when economic vulnerability and hostile cultural tides coincide.

Finally, contemporary Kansas commentary folds Haldeman-Julius into a broader effort to reclaim the state's radical past—placing the Little Blue Books alongside abolitionist Jayhawkers, Populists, and anti-lynching activists as evidence that Kansas identity need not be defined solely by its conservative present. This "usable past" contributes to free-speech memory in at least two ways. It highlights that robust, mass-market freethought and socialist literature once came from an unexpected place, and it implicitly challenges current Kansans to live up to, rather than merely celebrate, that legacy in debates over library book bans, school curricula, and academic freedom.

Taken together, the legal and cultural afterlives of Haldeman-Julius suggest a complex answer to the original question about "extra" free-speech protection in Kansas. The state did not, in any formal legal sense, confer special immunity on radical publishers. What it did offer, for a crucial few decades, was an unusually dense ecology of socialist activism, freethought, and working-class self-education that made it both possible for Little Blue Books to flourish and perhaps inevitable that later generations would remember Girard as a symbol of free expression—even

as they forget how precarious that freedom could be once obscenity, rather than socialism, became the central object of regulation.

## 9. Lessons for Contemporary Free Speech Debates

The story of Girard and Haldeman-Julius is, on the surface, a very local one: a small town, a particular printing plant, a particular publisher. Yet the dynamics that made Little Blue Books possible point toward wider lessons. They show that free speech is not only a matter of constitutional text or courtroom doctrine. It is also a question of who owns and operates the infrastructure of communication, how local communities respond to dissent, and where the real levers of coercive power sit in a multilayered legal order.

For contemporary debates about "free speech" in an era of platforms, content moderation, and competing jurisdictions, Girard offers a kind of historical thought experiment. It asks us to imagine what happens when formal rights are relatively stable, but the practical conditions for speaking and being heard depend on contingent alignments of technology, geography, and culture. The lessons that follow do not map one-to-one onto today's environment, but they help to sharpen questions that are often blurred in abstract arguments about rights.

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### 9.1 Infrastructure, not abstraction: presses, mail, and distribution networks

A first lesson is that the practical freedom to speak depends heavily on infrastructure. Haldeman-Julius did not simply "exercise" a right guaranteed by the Kansas Bill of Rights. He bought a building, inherited a three-deck Goss press, hired compositors and pressmen, and secured second-class mailing privileges that allowed him to send millions of booklets at subsidized rates. Without the physical plant and the rail-and-mail networks, the right to publish would have remained largely symbolic.

This matters because legal discourse about free speech often treats speakers as abstract individuals who produce words that either are or are not protected. The Girard case reminds us that speech is a material process: someone must pay for paper, ink, transport, and storage; someone must own and maintain the machines; someone must decide what kinds of packets the national distribution system will accept. A publisher who loses access to the post office is not "silenced" in the metaphysical sense, but his ability to reach a national audience collapses.

In contemporary terms, "presses and mail" translate into servers, content-delivery networks, app stores, payment processors, and recommendation systems. The constitutional right to speak means little if dominant infrastructures decline to carry one's speech, or carry it only under terms that strip it of reach and visibility. Girard suggests that debates about free

expression that focus only on formal rights, ignoring infrastructure, risk missing the real points of leverage. If the post office, the railway, and the Goss press were the decisive bottlenecks in Haldeman-Julius's time, the analogues today are not simply "the First Amendment" versus "censorship," but the complex mesh of private and public systems that determine whether a given message actually travels.

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### 9.2 The importance of local cultures of tolerance and indifference

A second lesson is that local culture shapes how law is felt. On paper, Kansas did not give Haldeman-Julius extraordinary legal privileges; its speech clause looks strong but has generally been read in line with federal doctrine. What made Girard workable was the way local actors—county attorneys, juries, neighbors, church leaders, merchants—chose to live with, and sometimes quietly support, a large radical press in their midst.

That support did not always take the form of enthusiastic endorsement. Sometimes the most important protection was indifference: officials who had other priorities, townspeople who regarded the plant as just another employer, and a general sense that "this is how Girard is" rather than "this must be stopped." In a region already used to coal strikes, socialist campaigns, and ethnic diversity, one more source of controversy could blend into the background.

This suggests that "culture of tolerance" need not mean a uniform ideological agreement about the value of dissent. It can also mean a set of habits and expectations that discourage turning every disagreement into a legal or moral crusade. In contemporary settings, the analogue might be communities—offline or online—where controversial speakers are neither celebrated nor constantly targeted, but simply allowed to operate within broad bounds so long as they do not cross clear lines of harm.

The Girard experience thus challenges a purely legalistic picture of free speech. Two towns under the same constitutional regime can feel very different to a dissident publisher, depending on whether local norms tilt toward moral panics or toward a weary, pragmatic "live and let live." Any serious attempt to assess or improve conditions for free expression today has to ask not only what the law allows, but also what local cultures encourage people to enforce or ignore.

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### 9.3 Federal versus state power in regulating dissenting print

A third lesson lies in the distribution of power. Haldeman-Julius's story demonstrates that strong-sounding state guarantees cannot by themselves neutralize federal authority. Kansas could pledge that "the liberty of the press shall be inviolate," but it could not stop Congress

from defining certain material as unmailable, or prevent federal prosecutors from bringing charges under national obscenity and espionage statutes.

This structural fact plays two roles in the Girard narrative. On the one hand, it limited what local support could accomplish. A sympathetic county attorney and a friendly jury could refrain from applying state obscenity laws; they could not restore second-class mailing privileges if the Post Office revoked them, nor could they prevent federal agents from monitoring the plant's mailings. On the other hand, it meant that the practical horizon of risk was determined more by shifting national standards than by any bold reinterpretation of the Kansas Bill of Rights.

For contemporary free-speech debates, this suggests caution about over-investing hope or fear in state-level measures alone. State constitutions, library policies, and campus regulations matter; they can protect or endanger particular speakers and institutions. But where national-level regulatory powers are involved—whether in communications law, national security, or taxation—they set outer limits that state-level guarantees cannot simply override.

The Girard case also illustrates a subtler point: the same federal system that threatens local dissenters can sometimes rescue them. Just as federal courts eventually constrained state-level obscenity raids in Kansas, so too today national or supranational bodies can counteract parochial crackdowns. The question is not whether federal power is "for" or "against" free speech in the abstract, but how its institutions are currently configured and which kinds of dissent they are inclined to tolerate.

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**9.4 What Girard suggests about today's platforms and jurisdictions**

Finally, Girard offers a set of analogies for thinking about today's platform-based public sphere. In the early twentieth century, a publisher needed a compliant local town, an efficient postal network, and a federal government that was willing—or at least not determined—to let controversial material pass. Today, a controversial speaker typically needs a host platform, a payment or donation system, and access to global digital networks governed by multiple overlapping jurisdictions.

In that sense, Girard can be read as an early example of "infrastructure shopping." Wayland and later Haldeman-Julius did not choose Kansas because its abstract laws were uniquely libertarian. They chose a specific town that combined rail lines, postal capacity, cheap labor, and a radical milieu, all within a state whose legal framework was no worse than average and whose officials were, on balance, willing to leave them alone. They optimized for an environment in which infrastructure and culture aligned just enough to make mass radical publishing feasible.

Contemporary creators and organizers engage in similar calculations, whether consciously or not. They choose among platforms with different moderation policies, payment processors with different risk tolerances, and jurisdictions with different libel, hate-speech, or data-protection regimes. A newsletter service hosted in one country, a video channel in another, and a donation platform in a third can together constitute the modern equivalent of the Girard plant plus the post office. The question "Where can I speak?" becomes inseparable from "Which infrastructures and legal orders will carry me?"

Girard also reminds us that no configuration is permanent. The Appeal to Reason lost crucial postal privileges; Little Blue Book titles that circulated freely in the 1920s and 1930s became entangled in obscenity prosecutions in the 1950s and 1960s. What appears, at one moment, as a stable, permissive environment can be transformed by political shifts, legal reinterpretations, or administrative policy changes. For today's debates about platform governance and jurisdictional arbitrage, this is a warning against simple narratives: there are no permanently "free" or permanently "censored" spaces, only moving alignments of law, infrastructure, and culture.

Taken together, these lessons suggest that the real significance of Girard for contemporary free-speech debates lies not in any unique Kansas statute but in the way the town crystallized a set of structural tensions. Rights on paper versus choke points in practice; state-level guarantees versus federal power; local tolerance versus national surveillance; and, above all, the fragile, contingent nature of any arrangement that allows unpopular ideas to travel widely. Understanding those tensions in one radical prairie town can help clarify what is at stake when we argue about free expression in a world of platforms, networks, and overlapping sovereignties.

**10. Conclusion**

The story that began with a deceptively simple question—whether "additional free speech laws in Kansas" enabled a radical publisher to work from a tiny town—turns out to be much more complicated than a legal footnote. Girard's role in the careers of *Appeal to Reason* and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius is not the tale of a single bold statute that unlocked a flood of dissenting print. It is the story of how constitutional language, industrial infrastructure, local culture, and federal power intertwined to create a narrow but real corridor in which controversial ideas could move.

Kansas did, on paper, promise an "inviolate" liberty of the press. But the decisive constraints on socialist agitation, freethought, and sex education came from federal postal rules and obscenity law, not from Topeka. What distinguished Girard was not a unique legal dispensation, but the presence of a radical regional milieu and a sophisticated print-and-mail apparatus that could

exploit every inch of the available freedom. When we put law, culture, and geography back into the frame, the image of "free Kansas" becomes both more modest and more interesting: less a myth of exceptional permission, more a case study in how dissent survives within ordinary rules.

### 10.1 Revisiting the original question about "additional free speech laws"

Viewed in this light, the original question more or less answers itself. There is no evidence that some special set of "additional" free speech laws in Kansas, above and beyond the state's standard constitutional clause, created a unique legal safe zone for Haldeman-Julius. The Kansas Bill of Rights contained strong language, but its courts interpreted that language in ways broadly aligned with federal doctrine. The same state that hosted a prolific freethought press later generated aggressive obscenity seizures and prosecutions, including the *A Quantity of Books* case and the trial of Henry J. Haldeman.

If we insist on keeping the phrase, we can only say that Kansas provided additional room in a looser sense. The state did not, during Haldeman-Julius's most productive years, press its own obscenity laws to the limit against him. Local officials in Girard and the surrounding region chose not to make his catalogue their main target. That restraint, however, stemmed more from the town's history, economy, and political culture than from a formally extraordinary legal framework.

The conclusion, then, is negative but clarifying: no special Kansas statute granted Haldeman-Julius a magic shield. What protection he enjoyed came from a combination of ordinary legal language, selectively applied, and from a set of non-legal conditions that made those words matter differently in Girard than they might have in many other places.

### 10.2 Law, culture, and geography in the life of a radical publisher

The positive lesson lies in how those conditions fit together. Law defined outer bounds. The Kansas press clause limited what state actors could do; federal obscenity and postal law defined what Washington was willing to tolerate. Within those bounds, culture and geography decided how dangerous it felt to print a given title or mail a given packet.

Girard's geography mattered twice. As a node in the Little Balkans coalfield, it stood at the intersection of rail lines, postal routes, and a dense concentration of unionized labor and immigrant communities. As the site of the *Appeal to Reason* plant, it hosted the presses, workers, and mailing routines that made large-scale distribution possible. A publisher in Girard did not just possess abstract rights; he controlled machinery and networks capable of turning those rights into millions of artifacts.

Culture mattered as the atmosphere in which law was interpreted and enforced. The mining region's history of strikes, socialist campaigning, and ethnic and religious diversity created a local environment where radical print did not automatically trigger panic. Many residents disliked or disagreed with Haldeman-Julius; some almost certainly denounced him. But the town as a whole had learned to live with a large radical press in its midst, and officials calibrated their enforcement choices accordingly.

Geography, in short, delivered infrastructure; culture supplied a spectrum of tolerance and indifference; law set the minimum and maximum of permissible action. Haldeman-Julius's career cannot be understood without all three.

**10.3 Limits of personal hero narratives without institutional context**

It is tempting to tell this story as the saga of a single courageous individual: a self-educated radical who defied puritanism, outwitted censors, and stuffed world literature and freethought into the pockets of workers. There is, to be sure, something inspiring in the scale of Haldeman-Julius's ambition and the stubbornness with which he kept issuing cheap books.

But a purely heroic biography obscures as much as it reveals. It risks treating federal postal policy as a backdrop, the Goss press as a prop, and the People's College as a footnote. It narrows our attention to questions of character—was he brave enough, shrewd enough, transgressive enough?—and leaves out questions about structure: who built the plant, who maintained the subscriber lists, how second-class mailing status was granted and revoked, and why a coalfield in Kansas developed the particular political culture it did.

Institutional context does not diminish individual agency; it explains the space in which that agency operates. Haldeman-Julius could only be a daring publisher because a previous generation of radicals had already turned Girard into a newspaper town; because Marian Wharton and the People's College created a ready market for cheap texts; because local officials chose not to escalate every complaint into a test case; and because, for a long run of years, federal authorities did not make him the primary object of their obscenity campaigns. When those conditions changed—when the postal environment tightened, the market shifted, and different officials took office—the same personal courage was no longer sufficient to sustain the enterprise.

Recapturing that institutional context allows us to see both the vulnerability and the contingency of radical publishing. It makes clear that courage alone cannot overcome hostile infrastructure, nor can clever editorial strategy indefinitely evade determined federal enforcement.

### 10.4 Final reflections on radical prairie printworks and the politics of place

In the end, Girard stands as a reminder that place matters in the politics of speech. It is not a nowhere, but a very specific somewhere: a small prairie town reoriented around a radical press, situated in a coalfield nicknamed Little Balkans, operating under a state constitution with strong press language and a federal system with powerful censorship tools.

From that somewhere, hundreds of millions of cheap booklets traveled outward, carrying classics, anticlerical arguments, socialist essays, and sex education to readers who might never have seen such material otherwise. For a few decades, the alignment of law, culture, and infrastructure made it possible for a particular version of “free thought” to become a mass-market commodity. Then the alignment shifted, and the experiment waned.

Looking back, it is easy to romanticize this as a lost golden age or to flatten it into a simple morality tale of repression. The more interesting reading is more modest and more demanding. It sees Girard not as an exception to the rules of free speech, but as a concrete instance of how those rules interact with economic and social realities. It suggests that any serious defense of expression, in any era, must attend to presses and postal routes, to local norms and national statutes, to who owns the channels and who decides what may pass through them.

Radical prairie printworks prove that places we think of as peripheral can become central to the circulation of ideas, provided that their politics of place—legal, cultural, and material—line up just enough. The challenge, now as then, is not only to praise the courage of individual publishers, but to notice and nurture the fragile configurations that allow unpopular words to travel at all.

## 11. References

### 11.1 Constitutional, statutory, and regulatory sources

Constitution of the State of Kansas. Bill of Rights, § 11 (“Liberty of press and speech; libel”). Topeka, 1859 (as amended).

U.S. Constitution, Amendment I.

Comstock Act of 1873, ch. 258, 17 Stat. 598 (Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use).

Espionage Act of 1917, ch. 30, 40 Stat. 217 (An Act to punish acts of interference with the foreign relations, and the foreign commerce of the United States, to punish espionage, and better to enforce the criminal laws of the United States, and for other purposes).

U.S. Post Office Department regulations governing “unmailable” and “obscene” matter (early twentieth century), as reproduced in contemporary legal and historical treatments of postal censorship.

### 11.2 Judicial decisions

A Quantity of Books v. Kansas, 378 U.S. 205 (1964).

State v. A Quantity of Copies of Books, 191 Kan. 13, 379 P.2d 254 (Kan. 1963).

State ex rel. Londerholm v. A Quantity of Copies of Books, 197 Kan. 306, 416 P.2d 703 (Kan. 1966).

Roth v. United States, 354 U.S. 476 (1957).

Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964).

Memoirs v. Massachusetts, 383 U.S. 413 (1966).

Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).

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### 11.3 Primary print and archival sources

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Wharton, Marian. Plain English for Workers and related People's College correspondence-course materials. Fort Scott, KS: People's College, ca. 1914–1917.

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**11.4 Secondary works on Kansas radicalism and Girard**

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"Radicalism in Southeast Kansas" and related exhibit essays, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas (including sections on coal mining, labor, and socialist politics in the Little Balkans).

Hoffhines, Megan. "Socialism in the Mines: How Labor Organizations Led Southeast Kansas Miners to Radicalism." Honors thesis, Pittsburg State University, 2012.

"In Kansas' mining past, lessons for our present-day political extremism." Kansas Reflector, December 21, 2022. (Discusses coal camps, socialism, and Appeal to Reason in southeast Kansas.)

"Little Balkans" local histories and tourism materials (Explore Crawford County; Kansas Sampler Foundation descriptions of immigrant mining communities).

**11.5 Secondary works on Haldeman-Julius and the Little Blue Books**

Mordell, Albert, ed. The World of Haldeman-Julius. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1960.

“Little Blue Books.” Research Starters entry (EBSCO), including historical overview and bibliography.

Herder, Dale M. “Haldeman-Julius and Popular Culture.” Autodidact Project (online essay; discusses Little Blue Books as mass-education tools).

Palmer, W. P. “Emanuel Haldeman-Julius and the Lessons of the Little Blue Books.” Working paper, 2006.

“E. Haldeman-Julius.” Biographical entry with further-reading list (including dissertations by Melanie Ann Brown and Andrew Cothran) in a modern encyclopedia of unbelief.

Local and state historical articles on Haldeman-Julius, Little Blue Books, and Girard (e.g., regional library and historical society essays, Kansas-based feature journalism).

**11.6 Secondary works on People’s College and labor education**

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**11.7 Secondary works on obscenity, free speech, and press doctrine**

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Brunnstrom, Erik. “Abortion and the Mails: The Comstock Act, Vagueness, and Enforcement History.” Harvard Law & Policy–related working paper (examines modern invocations of the Comstock statutes).

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Vile, John R., David L. Hudson Jr., and David Schultz, eds. Encyclopedia of the First Amendment. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2009. (Includes entries on A Quantity of Books v. Kansas and key obscenity cases.)

“The Other Press Clauses.” Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, 2024. (Discusses robust state press clauses, including Kansas’s “liberty of the press shall be inviolate” language.)

U.S. Supreme Court, Library of Congress, and constitutional commentary volumes summarizing the impact of A Quantity of Books v. Kansas on search-and-seizure doctrine for expressive materials.

These references collectively ground the article’s treatment of Kansas law, Girard’s radical milieu, the Little Blue Books enterprise, and the mid-century evolution of obscenity and free-speech doctrine.

The author has published over 4,600 AI-assisted papers at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Douglas-Youvan/research . Google Scholar has indexed these preprints, and if you want a particular reference, the AI mode of a Google search (Gemini) has efficiently catalogued these preprints.